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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KUWAIT 000518

SIPDIS

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KU
SUBJECT: U.S. PROGRAMS PROPEL KUWAITI WOMEN TO GREEN CHAIRS
OF PARLIAMENT

REF: A. KUWAIT 385
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 463

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and
d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. In Kuwait's May 16 election, four U.S. educated women -- Dr. Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak, Dr. Aseel Al-Awadhi, Dr. Rola Dashti, and Dr. Salwa Al-Jassar -- became the first women to win seats in Kuwait's fifty-member parliament. Embassy believes their electoral chances were significantly enhanced by their U.S. education and by MEPI and NDI training and participation in USG exchange programs. As the Secretary noted, these female MPs' "talents, energy, and intelligence" will be invaluable assets in their efforts to develop Kuwait. (Note: This is a follow-up cable to Ref A's predictions of how Kuwait's most promising female candidates would fare in the May 16 elections. End note.) End summary.

Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak, the First Female Minister, Takes 1st in First Constituency

[1](#)2. (U) Dr. Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak, Kuwait's first female minister and a political science professor at Kuwait University, took first place in the nearly half-Shi'a First Constituency. Her 14,247 votes made her the most popular Shi'a candidate and the eighth most popular candidate in the country. She has announced that she will seek the Deputy Speaker position once the parliamentary session begins on May [1](#)31.

[1](#)3. (U) Dr. Ma'asouma is no stranger to leadership roles or controversy in the Kuwaiti government. On July 14, 2005, she was appointed Kuwait's Minister of Planning and State Minister for Administrative Development Affairs, making her the first woman in Kuwaiti history to head a ministry. During her tenure as Minister of Planning, she outlined a progressive, pro-reform five-year plan. In July 2006, Dr. Ma'asouma was appointed Kuwait's Minister of Communications. Her personal involvement allowed Embassy to resolve a long-standing multi-million dollar dispute between the MOC and AT&T. She also spearheaded efforts to sign an open skies agreement with the U.S. In March 2007, she assumed the troubled portfolio of Kuwait's Minister of Health. Three previous Health Ministers had been "grilled" (interrogated on the parliament floor) and forced to resign.

[1](#)4. (U) Appointed Health Minister shortly after the beginning of a bird flu outbreak in Kuwait, Dr. Ma'asouma led the ministry's effective and encouragingly transparent response in containing the outbreak and allaying public concerns. On August 24, 2007, Islamist MPs Faisal Al-Mislim and Dr. Waleed Al-Tabtabaie -- both of whom won their 2009 re-election bids

-- submitted to Speaker Jassem Al-Kharafi a motion to grill Dr. Ma'asouma following the August 23 Jahra Hospital fire which led to the death of two elderly patients and injury to nineteen others. Saying that she was ashamed that the fire had happened under her watch, Al-Mubarak resigned before she could be grilled. Local observers suggested that she was being drummed out of office because of her stance against corruption and favoritism in health care provision and notably because she refused to pander to the 'wasta' (or nepotistic) demands of prominent MPs.

15. (U) U.S. programs and visits:

-- February 2000: participated in a single-country International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) for politically active Kuwaiti women on the "Fundamentals of Political Organization."

-- September 2005: participated in a National Democratic Institute (NDI) campaign school funded by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which was launched four months after Kuwaiti women gained the right to vote and run for office and which was designed to develop campaign and advocacy skills.

-- June 2006: participated in NDI campaign training in the lead up to Kuwait's 2006 parliamentary election, but later decided not to run.

-- January 2007: met with U/S Paula Dobriansky and told her that USG support has been beneficial to the promotion of women's rights.

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-- October 2007: met with Laura Bush during the First Lady's visit to Kuwait.

-- January 2008: met with President Bush at the "Women's Round-table Discussion on Democracy and Development" hosted by Embassy Kuwait.

16. (U) Biographical note: Dr. Ma'asouma earned a PhD in International Relations from the University of Denver in 1982. She supports close political relations with the U.S., but privately told PolOff that she does not condone the U.S. "double standard" of simultaneously allowing Israel to have nuclear weapons and threatening Iran with sanctions over the same issue.

Aseel Al-Awadhi, Kuwait's New Political Face, Takes 2nd in Third Constituency

17. (U) Dr. Aseel Al-Awadhi, a political science professor at Kuwait University, took second place in the Third Constituency with 11,860 votes. She earned a PhD in Political Science from the University of Texas. Dr. Aseel came to national prominence in the 2008 parliamentary elections when, despite not winning a seat, she gained more votes than any Kuwaiti woman in history. Her 5,000 votes were just 886 short of winning a seat. She campaigned with the National Democratic Alliance and was the only female candidate to run on a ticket rather than independently.

18. (C) This year, Dr. Aseel had the best and worst of times with YouTube: in an unprecedented move and PR coup, she posted a video of her candidacy announcement to the video sharing site. However, Islamist candidates later ran a smear campaign against her by using YouTube to publicize a video of her challenging her class to engage in critical thinking by leading discussions on Koranic Sura number 33, which called on Mohammed to instruct his wives to wear the hijab (Ref B). Challenging Dr. Aseel on theological grounds, Islamist Dr. Walid Al-Tabtabaei accused her of approaching (but not crossing) theological red lines, saying that "infringement on

the legitimacy of the hijab and claiming that it was meant only for the wives of Prophet Mohammed is a serious issue and should not have been said in an academic institution." Dr. Aseel was particularly targeted by other Islamist attacks, including a Salafi fatwa against voting for women which was issued just weeks before the election. Interestingly, at no point in this smear campaign was Dr. Aseel targeted by Islamists for being a divorcee.

¶9. (U) U.S. programs and visits:

-- May 2008 and May 2009: in the lead-up to elections, Dr. Aseel and her staff regularly participated in NDI campaign training.

Rola Dashti, the Ambitious Outsider, Takes 7th in Third Constituency

¶10. (U) Dr. Rola Dashti, head of the Kuwait Economic Society and an associate professor of economics at Kuwait University, took seventh place in Kuwait's Third Constituency with 7,666 votes. She earned a PhD in economics from Johns Hopkins. Her election campaigns were hurt by the fact that she spent most of her life outside of Kuwait (in Lebanon and the U.S.) and speaks with a Lebanese accent. However, she was a central figure in the reconstruction programs following the liberation of Kuwait and has continued to play an active role in Kuwaiti domestic politics, serving as head of the Kuwait Economic Society.

¶11. (U) U.S. programs and visits:

-- 2000: along with Dr. Ma'asouma, participated in the single-country IVLP on the "Fundamentals of Political Organization."

-- 2003: participated in a regional IVLP on "Women as Political Leaders."

-- September 2005: participated in an NDI campaign school funded by MEPI.

-- June 2006: participated in NDI campaign training in the lead up to Kuwait's 2006 parliamentary election.

-- January 2007: met with U/S Paula Dobriansky during her

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visit to Kuwait.

-- January 2007: met with Secretary Rice during her visit to Kuwait.

-- January 2008: met with President Bush at the "Women's Round-table Discussion on Democracy and Development" hosted by Embassy Kuwait.

Salwa Al-Jassar, the Family-Campaign Traditionalist, Takes 10th in Second Constituency

¶12. (U) Dr. Salwa Al-Jassar, the liberal-traditionalist professor whose husband ran her campaign, took tenth place in Kuwait's businessman-dominated Second Constituency with 4,776 votes. She earned a PhD in Teaching Methods at University of Pittsburgh in 1991 and is a professor of education at Kuwait University. After winning the election, she said, "Finally, our democracy is walking on two legs as we now have both male and female parliamentarians." Like Dr. Aseel, she was heavily involved in campaign training from the NDI in both this election and the 2008 contest.

¶13. (U) U.S. programs and visits:

-- 2003: participated in a Vital Voices Citizen Exchange Program which was funded by ECA.

-- September 2005: participated in an NDI campaign school funded by MEPI.

-- October 2007: met with Laura Bush during the First Lady's visit to Kuwait.

-- May 2008 and May 2009: in the lead-up to elections, Dr. Salwa and her staff regularly participated in NDI campaign training.

Honorable Mention: Thikra Al-Rashidi

¶14. (U) Although lawyer Thikra Al-Rashidi did not win a seat, she won a significant number of votes (6,635) in Kuwait's Fourth Constituency. In fact, she won almost two thousand more votes than Salwa Al-Jassar, but was competing in a much larger constituency. Thikra, of the Al-Rasheed tribe, was welcomed frequently in all male diwaniyyas in her all-tribal constituency.

¶15. (U) U.S. programs:

-- January 2005: participated in a regional IVLP on "Promoting Rule of Law and Judicial Reform."

-- May 2008 and May 2009: in the lead-up to elections, Thikra and her staff regularly participated in NDI campaign training.

How They Won

¶16. (U) There were three key factors in the female candidates' victories:

-- In the midst of an economic and political crisis, weary Kuwaitis decided to vote for change, which the female candidates clearly represented.

-- All four winning candidates ran well-managed campaigns, the result of both NDI assistance and the experience earned by running in previous elections. Also, most of these campaigns targeted younger voters who, according to the Kuwaiti Transparency Society, turned out in record numbers.

-- In the week before the election, the Amir gave a speech in which he called on Kuwaiti voters to "make the right decision" and strongly suggested that electing another Salafi-dominated parliament would result in another rapid dissolution or a continuation of political gridlock. The female candidates, in many ways the antithesis of the Islamists, benefited most from the Amir's statement.

Four Female Winners Extensively Trained by U.S.

¶17. (C) Comment: The election of these four women is a

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stunning success for Kuwait's developing democracy. It is also a testament to the value of USG efforts to provide training and opportunities for budding leaders. We anticipate that these women and other like-minded (and USG trained) colleagues will play an invaluable, long-term role in opening up and expanding Kuwait's increasingly vibrant democratic experiment. End comment.

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